CIO Information in the News

Fall '99 Volume IV Issue 4

INSIDE

VA Implements OMB Web Privacy Policy

By: Walter Houser, OI&T, Information Management Service

A Warning to Webmasters -- Are you protecting the privacy of your visitors? Do you have a guestbook and collect guests names and addresses? Do you gather veterans email addresses in your email address book? Are your applications writing cookies to visitor browsers? Are you writing cookies to your web server? Do you publish log data that reveals who visited your web site during their lunch hour? If you don't know the answers to these privacy questions, you need to find out, and soon.

On June 2, 1999, Jacob Lew, Director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) signed policy memorandum M99-18 requiring all Departments and agencies to post appropriate privacy policies on their web sites. Following the OMB guidance and model privacy policy language, VA drafted Privacy Act statements at http://www.va.gov/privacy/ for the principal categories of information collection that occur on VA web sites.

We prepared statements for information collected for statistical purposes, security, intrusion, detection, Privacy Act Systems of Records, and VA's use of cookies. These privacy notices appear at http://www.va.gov/privacy/. By December, privacy policies will be posted to any other known, major entry points to VA web sites as well as at any web page where there is substantial collection of personal information from the public.

We added a link to the VA privacy notice in the VA web page templates at http://vaww.va.gov/template.htm and http://vaww.va.gov/template.asp for the Active Server Page web programmers. Using these links is the first step in complying with the OMB directive. The second step is to read the notices and see if you are doing what you say you are doing! The third step is to check your applications for cookie creation; if you are generating these tasty web morsels, you don't necessarily have to stop. But you at least must say what data you are collecting, why, and what you intend to do with it. The fourth step is to add the electronic mail notice to your Internet mail address. So if your message is forwarded to another for action, the recipient has been advised of the limitations to the confidentiality of their message.

THE CIO SCENE

By: Harold F. Gracey, Jr., Acting VA Chief Information Officer

At the One VA conferences held in Phoenix, AZ and Atlanta, GA, attendees were asked to identify national and local issues that would help improve seamless service to veterans. Listed below are the top three national ideas generated by each group of participants.

Phoenix, AZ

1. Develop an integrated computer information system accessible to all three administrations;
2. Develop a uniform national data base; and
3. Develop a nationwide plan to integrate services, including co-locations and redefinition and consolidation of service delivery systems.

Atlanta, GA

1. Develop an integrated computer system for veteran data;
2. Create a "smart card" national ID card for veterans; and
3. Create a consolidated 800 telephone number for veteran information.

You can see similarities in the issues identified by both attendee groups. VA's senior management heard you, and is responding. Deputy Secretary Gober has charged me, as VA's Acting Chief Information Officer (CIO) in consultation with the Department's CIO Council and business line managers to develop a plan that includes milestones and estimated costs for achieving the type of integrated information system architecture necessary to support:

- Front-line employee access to needed information across VA; and
- An accurate, consistent, and reliable integrated information system covering all veterans.

The CIO Council has formed an integrated work group, with participants from the Administrations and Staff Offices that are working together to develop this plan and report back to the Deputy Secretary.

The CIO Council has also formed an Internet Use Work Group (IUWG) composed of representatives of all three Administrations and Staff Offices. This group will identify and coordinate development of departmental policies and strategies needed to guide the advantageous deployment and use of internet technology by VA customers, organizations, employees, and contractors. The IUWG interacts with the Veterans Health Administration managed and funded Veteran Focused Internet Redesign Project, Information Technology (IT) Security, and the VA Webmasters Group.

Working together we can make the One VA Conference theme "One Mission, One Vision, One Voice" a reality.

Members of the VA CIO Council being briefed by Peter Weiss of the Office of Management and Budget and Richard Guida, Chairman of the Federal Public Key Infrastructure (PKI) Steering Committee
Photo by: Priscilla Kates, VA Photographer

VA Moves Forward With Electronic Delivery Services

By: Loise Russell, OI&T, Program Coordination Staff

In 1998, Congress passed the Government Paperwork Elimination Act (GPEA) which expanded the goal of broad-based electronic information dissemination contained in the Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA) to include interactive service delivery. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) developed the procedures and guidance for agencies in implementing and planning the requirements as prescribed by the GPEA of 1998. The final guidance will be issued in April 2000, with a requirement to have ongoing studies of agency progress.

Mr. Peter Weiss (OMB) and Mr. Richard Guida (Chairman of Federal Public Key Infrastructure (PKI) Steering Committee) briefed the VA CIO Council on GPEA and PKI requirements. The legislation provides a challenging opportunity to use modern technology and business practices to improve VA's service to our nation's veterans and their dependents. Since this legislation was passed over a year ago, VA has developed some policies, conducted studies, and implemented several ongoing PKI pilot tests. Various IT projects were approved to enhance information technology systems, support electronic delivery service, and improve electronic record keeping.

A preliminary review is being conducted and a GPEA committee is being formed that will assist in establishing a common vision of electronic business opportunities and a framework for identifying and approving electronic transactions and on-line form access. The GPEA requires agencies to have systems available for electronic interactions with the public to the extent practicable by October 2003.

One of the GPEA reporting requirements includes a provision for agencies to provide a report to OMB on major electronic delivery projects. OMB has issued OMB Bulletin No. 99-06, "Fiscal Year 2000 Information Collection Budget (ICB)" to instruct agency Chief Information Officers (CIOs) on how to prepare and submit information on agency activities to improve the public's access to Federal information resources. This report is due to OMB on December 17, 1999. VA is required to provide an update of ongoing and planned major electronic information collection and dissemination activities and a summary

of planned expansion of electronic information collection and dissemination activities, including a timetable and budgetary figures for electronic information collection and dissemination activities.

VA is moving forward in its effort to deliver a wide range of services electronically. Electronic Delivery Service initiatives will drive the progress toward a full paperless environment.

Any additional information on the GPEA requirements can be obtained from Ms. Loise A. Russell, OI&T Program Coordination Staff (202) 273-7501 and on the Information Collection Budget Reporting Requirement from Ron Taylor (202) 273-8015 and Denise McLamb at (202) 273-8135.

Y2K Compliance and Beyond

By: Steve Ciccarelli, OI&T, Information Technology Support Service

On September 1, 1999, Year 2000 desktop system's compliance reports for each organizational element within VA Central Office (VACO) were due to the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Information and Technology. The reports reflect VACO Y2K readiness at the time the assessments were conducted. However, the compliance assessments are merely a snapshot and a great deal can change between the time of that compliance assessment and the beginning of the next century.

Year 2000 compliance is best viewed as a continuing series of evaluations and compliance modifications. Events occur during the life cycle of a PC that can cause a compliant PC to become non-compliant.The following are examples of such events and their potential to affect Year 2000 compliance:

- Software developers may discover additional Year 2000 problems and issue fixes (i.e., service patches or service releases). Software, which was previously found to be compliant, now requires additional updates and another round of remediation. The Y2K fixes will continue to be issued well into the Year 2000.

- New application software is loaded on the PC. The Year 2000 compliance of that software needs to be tested and certified.

- A new hard drive is installed on the PC or the hard drive is reformatted. Reloading Windows and application software from the original media (e.g., CD-ROMs) will result in a software implementation that needs to be reassessed for compliance, and the application of appropriate service packs/software updates necessary for Y2K compliance.

- Reinstalling Windows (95/NT) on the PC means the Y2K compliance for the operating system needs to be assessed.

- Microsoft Networking is deleted and reinstalled (e.g., an old network interface card is replaced or the PC is reconfigured as a client on the network). In this case, networking files are rewritten and later versions may need to be reinstalled.

- A new PC is purchased and configured as a workstation on the network. While newer PCs are most likely hardware compliant, they might not have the latest software updates and patches applied.

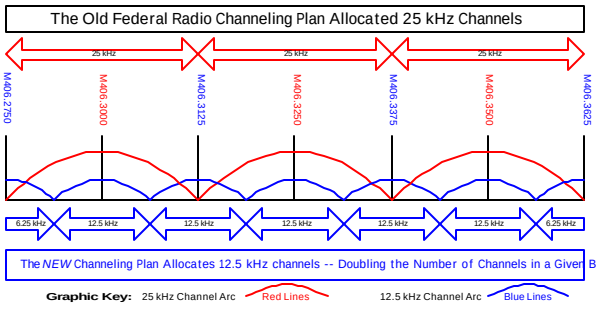
It is important that we all realize Year 2000 compliance is an ongoing issue affecting the entire spectrum of information technology and will continue to do so well into the 21st century.

Mandated Transition From Wideband to Narrowband Systems

By: Phillip Nash, OI&T, Office of Telecommunications

The Office of Telecommunications sponsored joint presentations on Radio and Frequency Solutions for the 21st Century at the August 9–13, Information Technology Conference held in Austin, Texas. Major radio equipment vendors participated in the presentations, along with staff of the National Telecommunications and Information Administration and the Veterans Health Administration. The thrust of the sessions was to establish a sense of urgency for planning, budgeting and implementing the imminent transition from wideband radio systems and frequencies to the new, congressionally mandated narrowband systems – in time to meet the deadlines established by Congress.

The transition from wideband radio facilities began Government-wide on January 1, 1995. After nearly five years, VA has accomplished 12% of the gigantic task of converting its Very High Frequency (VHF) band to narrowband operation which must be completed by December 31, 2004. To further emphasize the importance of the narrowband transition, and how it will affect VA operations beginning January 1, 2005, the Office of Telecommunications has commissioned a direct mail information effort to VA radio system users. This program will provide installation staff with a snapshot of their facility's progress to date, systems remaining to be converted to narrowband, and sources of information and help which may be useful in their transition planning effort.



Y2K FMS End-to-End Test

By: Sharon Latsha, OI&T, Austin Automation Center

A Year 2000 (Y2K) Financial Management System (FMS) end-to-end test was conducted from April 12-30, 1999, to ensure Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) FMS can successfully interface with other VA systems in the new millennium. The test included data flows from point of origin to final output for payments to veterans, vendors, and VA employees. The testing effort required coordination and cooperation across VA departments. The VA departments participating included Veterans Health Administration (VHA), Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), Financial Services Center (FSC), and VA Corporate Systems. Also included in the FMS testing was an end-to-end testing of payroll processing. The testing not only determined that FMS is ready, but also confirmed that Personnel and Accounting Integrated Data (PAID) processing is Year 2000 (Y2K) ready.

An isolated test environment was established at the Austin Automation Center (AAC) by creating a separate logical partition within the S/390 Enterprise Server. All the necessary applications and support software was copied into the SY2K logical partition. A similar effort occurred at Bay Pines, Florida, where a completely isolated Y2K environment was established at the test lab for Veterans Health Information Systems and Technology Architecture (**VISTA**) applications; Integrated Funds Distribution, Control Point Activity, Accounting and Procurement (IFCAP); FEE Basis; Accounts Receivable (AR); and PAID Query and Extract (QE) Electronic Time and Attendance (ETA). A separate Integrated Data Communications Utility (IDCU) link was established between the two technical environments with support from Bell South. For the Austin FSC, personal computers and servers were connected to the environment dedicated to the Y2K testing. A separate dial-up connection between Department of Veterans Affairs Central Office (VACO) and Remote Access Services (RAS) on the Y2K server at Bay Pines was created for VA corporate testing.

There were 28 future system dates tested over a period of 19 days beginning with October 6, 1999, and ending with February 28, 2001. The test operators and data reviewers worked 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to complete the test schedule. All of the data processing was documented and problem resolution forms were prepared as necessary.

Overall, the test was highly successful. Only two Y2K problems were encountered which were easily and rapidly corrected. In addition to the successful execution of the application systems, the Y2K FMS end-to-end test also verified that the **V***IST***A** servers participating in the test at Bay Pines and the SY2K partition at the AAC, were able to communicate using Mailman, Data Management Interface (DMI), and Dynacomm 3270 emulation using a transmission control protocol/internet protocol (TCP/IP) gateway.

The Y2K FMS end-to-end test demonstrated that VA's FMS can successfully interface with other VA systems in the new millennium.

Electronic Access For Disabled

By: Susan Boaz, OI&T, Information Technology Support Service, and Loise Russell, OI&T, Program Coordination Staff

On August 7, 1998, President Clinton signed the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, which includes a revision of Section 508 that imposes strict requirements for any electronic and information technology developed, maintained, procured, or used by federal agencies. Electronic and information technology is expansively defined. It includes computers (such as hardware, software, and accessible data such as web pages), facsimile machines, copiers, telephones, and other equipment used for transmitting, receiving, using, or storing information.

Section 508 was effective on the day that it was enacted and procurement policymakers are drafting new acquisition rules that will require agencies to buy IT that is accessible to users with disabilities. All federal agencies must now take steps to ensure that the electronic and information technologies used in their programs are accessible to all employees including those with disabilities. In addition, agency web sites must also be accessible to anyone using them.

To determine the accessibility level of our information technology systems, we participated in a study conducted by the U. S. Department of Justice (DOJ) and submitted a comprehensive report of our agency findings and recommendations. The report identifies areas for improvements at VA as well as provides recommendations for implementation by other federal agencies and industry.

VA's strategic goal is to improve our customers' ability to access the offices, facilities and services of the Department. We have a recognized worldwide Adaptive Training Program with staff members that provide quality information technology training services. This Program has benefited the Department since 1986 and continues to be the driving force for improved accessibility throughout the Department.

Here are some direct links of web design resources that are helpful when designing and testing Web pages.

Making Your Web Site Accessible
http://www.itpolicy.gsa.gov/cita/wpa.htm
A one-page overview with links to DOJ and the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) guidelines and HTML.

Accessible Web Design Links
http://w3.gsa.gov/web/m/cita.nsf/Links/acsweb
This provides links to the most prominent web sites addressing IT accessibility.

Check Your Page
http://w3.gsa.gov/web/m/cita.nsf/CheckYourPage/
A tool that is currently being developed to help individuals analyze their web pages.

Any additional IT accessibility resources or up to date information on the DOJ's accessibility study can be obtained from the VA Adaptive Training Unit (202) 273-6542 or Ms. Loise A. Russell, OI&T, Program Coordination Staff (202) 273-7501.

AAC Reaches Level 2 of CMM

By: Software Engineering Process Group, OI&T, Austin Automation Center

A strong trend exists throughout government and industry toward standardized processes in the development and enhancement of information technology systems. Currently, one of the most utilized and trusted Software Process Improvement (SPI) methodologies is the Software Capability Maturity Model (SW-CMM) developed by the Software Engineering Institute (SEI) at Carnegie Mellon University. The SEI's SW-CMM helps organizations achieve SPI by presenting a series of five well-defined maturity levels, each outlining practices to be adopted and goals to be met before advancing to higher process maturity levels. The SW-CMM has become a de facto standard for measuring the effectiveness of information technology (IT) organizations, and statistics show that organizations with a higher software development maturity level significantly improve their productivity and return on investment.

The majority of all organizations function at Level 1, the lowest level. In a Software Capability Evaluation (SCE) conducted by the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) in June of 1996, the Austin Automation Center (AAC) received a SW-CMM Level 1 maturity rating. In an effort to raise this rating, the AAC immediately began planning the implementation of a more repeatable software development process. To accomplish this, the AAC established a Software Engineering Process Group (SEPG) to serve as the catalyst for this SPI effort. This group and other organizations of the AAC improved their software development processes and achieved the SW-CMM Level 2 rating, the most difficult of all levels to attain. As other organizations within the AAC demonstrate their ability to perform at a repeatable level, they will also be added to this "advanced process" organization.

The AAC is dedicated to the continuous improvement of the software development process. Therefore, the next step is Level 3 of the SEI's SW-CMM. This will help ensure that AAC software development projects build in quality from the very beginning of the software development life cycle (SDLC), resulting in higher customer satisfaction and improved service to veterans.

VA ITC – IT is Our Bridge to the Future

By: Carolyn Webb, OI&T, Austin Automation Center

The theme of this year's Information Technology conference (ITC) was especially appropriate for the record-breaking crowds who traveled to Austin, Texas, from all over the United States, and as far away as Australia and Finland. Recognizing that information technology is one of the most important tools available to meet the demands of the coming millennium, conference sponsors hoped to challenge attendees to discover new and creative ways to accomplish the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) goal of serving the nation's veterans.

The keynote speaker at the ITC's opening ceremony, Danny Cox (best selling author and former United States Air Force pilot), set the tone of enthusiasm and excitement that characterized the week. Attendees had a wide choice of training sessions on over 250 topics and a total of over 300 sessions. Several sessions were broadcast via satellite to VA offices across the nation for those who were

unable to attend. Special hands-on training for the visually impaired was expanded to 5 days this year, and a record 32 employees participated, as well as 8 guide dogs.

One of the conference highlights was EXPO, the exhibit area, which more than doubled in size this year to 143 booths, and included private vendors for the first time. Exhibitors displayed a full range of cutting-edge products and services related to information technology.

The 11th annual conference was hosted by the Austin Automation Center, and co-sponsored by the Office of Information & Technology, Veterans Health Administration, and Veterans Benefits Administration. All employees are encouraged to visit the ITC Web site at http://vaww.aac.va.gov/itc1999 for information about the conference and topics presented. Session handouts from the 1999 ITC are available on the Web site, as well as links to other sites.

Watch Those Cookies!

By: Walter Houser, OI&T, Information Management Service

A "cookie" is a file placed on the web visitor's personal computer by a Web application to monitor use of the site. It is VA policy to explain what information the cookie collects and how that information is used. If a visitor encounters a cookie at a VA site and there is no explanation or the explanation is not clear or reasonable, we ask them to contact VA's Privacy Officer at foia@mail.va.gov. For more information on cookies, see the Department of Energy's Computer Incident Advisory Capability (CIAC) Bulletin I-034: Internet Cookie at http://www.ciac.org/ciac/bulletins/i-034.shtml.

Automation Resources Added to VA's Home Page

By: Basil White, OI&T, Information Management Service

Federal web pages are evolving from communication portals into mandated official repositories of Government information. Many of these web pages require ongoing changes to incorporate new mandated links and changes in Department-wide publishing styles. The Office of Information and Technology, Information Management Service (IMS) has created a set of templates and reference files that will help VA web designers publish information that is visually consistent and easier to update, and automatically performs many of the content changes.

These templates use keywords that make web pages easier to find by search engines, and include descriptive information about the page when the search engine indexes the page. Keywords minimize search failures by customers of VA's Home Page.

One of the template references "include files" that automatically add the mandated links and buttons for the VA home page, customer service page, and the new mandated Privacy Act disclaimer. As these mandated links change, the "include files" are updated to reflect these changes. Therefore, every page that uses these "include files" is automatically updated with the latest and greatest set of links.

The reference files include a cascading style sheet that defines display properties for the most common elements of a web page. Users that reference this file benefit from sharing a visual consistency with every other web page that uses the file, improving the overall visual consistency of VA's Home Page.

IMS teaches a course called "Writing VA Web Pages With Style" (http://vaww.va.gov/oirm/training) that explains how to use these files and other techniques to create elegant, usable web content. A tutorial that includes explanations of the templates and files is available at http://vaww.va.gov/oirm/training/stylguid/index.htm.

VBA Hosts Nationwide Year 2000 Workshop

By: Lee Pritchard, VBA Y2K Program Office

The Veterans Benefits Administration hosted a nationwide Year 2000 (Y2K) Workshop July 26 to 30, 1999, in Pittsburgh, PA. The nationwide Y2K Workshop was jointly sponsored by the VBA Office of Field Operations and the Office of Information Management. The Workshop theme, "Campaign 2000 - The March to the Next Millennium" concentrated on the Department and VBA's status, contingency planning and disaster recovery.

All Regional Offices, VBA's business lines, representatives from Federal oversight agencies, contractors, and representatives from the Veterans Service Organizations attended the workshop. The attendees were briefed on the VBA's year 2000 conversion progress by the Deputy Under Secretaries for Management and Operations; on VA's progress by the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Information and Technology and VA's Y2K Project Manager; VHA's Y2K Project Manager; and cumulated with a closing speech by the Deputy Secretary on Friday, July 30, 1999.

Representatives from the Philadelphia and Hines Benefits Delivery Centers and Systems Development Centers, including Austin, the Philadelphia Information Technology Support Center (ITSC), and the Hines Systems Implementation Office provided the workshop attendees with their preparedness roles and responsibilities for the upcoming turn of the century. The business lines discussed their iteration of the Business Continuity and Contingency Plans (BCCP) and the VBA Year 2000 Project staff reviewed the field stations BCCPs, while the Emergency Preparedness Office discussed the Continuity of Operations Plans (COOP) and the future plans of the President's International Coordination Center.

The Under Secretary for Benefits, Mr. Joe Thompson, hosted a banquet during the week for the 168 attendees. Mr. Thompson spoke of the major accomplishments made by VBA in preparation for the turn of the century by its employees. During the banquet, members of the Pittsburgh Regional Office, including the Director, Barry Jackson, were presented with accommodations and certificates of appreciation for their administrative and technical support of this nationwide event.

The three and ½ day workshop culminated with the Honorable Hershel Gober, Deputy Secretary, who shared his experiences on Y2K inquiries by the Congress and Senate during Congressional hearings on the status of the Government's conversion progress and the VA's preparedness for the rollover. Mr. Gober assured everyone that VA is ready to continue uninterrupted services to our veterans and the local communities we serve throughout the next millennium.

Internet Use Work Group

By: Becki Wells, OI&T, Program Coordination Staff

The Internet Use Work Group (IUWG) was established in May 1999 at the request of the VA CIO Council. The IUWG is made up of representatives from each Administration, Staff Office, the VA Webmasters Group, the VA IT Security Group, the Telecommunications Staff and four VHA VISNs. The IUWG keeps abreast of the activities of other groups involved in Internet related activities such as the Veteran-Focused Internet Redesign Project, IT Security Group, VA Webmasters Group and the Government Paperwork Elimination Act.

The IUWG mission is to identify and organize development of departmental level policies and strategies needed to guide the advantageous deployment and use of Internet technology by VA customers, organizations, employees, and contractors. The IUWG identified issues associated with conducting VA business over the Internet/Intranet. To facilitate further discussion and investigation of these issues, three sub-groups were formed. These sub-groups are:

Information Publishing and Retrieval
This group explores the needs and issues surrounding the use of Internet technology as an "information portal" to publish and retrieve information. This group is looking at current VA policies and proposing new policies that will govern the publication of VA information on VA web sites.

Internet as a Transactional Platform
This group investigates issues associated with using Internet technology to conduct business with VA customers. The IUWG defines VA customers as VA employees, the veteran, the general public and other business partners.

Internet and a Delivery Channel for Tools and Applications
This group examines VA needs and issues surrounding the use of Internet technology to deliver tools and applications to meet VA's mission.

Some of the topics being discussed by the subgroups are security, infrastructure, web-based application development criteria, resource management, Internet access, customer service, transactional data capture, appropriate/ inappropriate use, accessibility and responsibilities. The IUWG will be submitting a draft Internet Policy to the CIO Council for review and consideration within the next 60 – 90 days. The group will also submit a report that contains identified issues and recommended strategies to the CIO Council by the end of the year.

Hy Tech's Tip

By: Jay Anderson, OI&T, Technology Integration Service

Email has become a common vehicle for malevolence. Individuals may send macro virus infected word documents, computer virus infected novelty programs, or other harassing emails.

Look at all emails with a healthy degree of suspicion. Unusual subject lines such as "Here is the document I promised" or mail from unknown persons should make you skeptical. Don't respond to, or open any email you receive from unknown persons (particularly from outside of VA, or from generic VA accounts, such as "VA student" email accounts).

Don't open unknown attachments or click on internet links within unknown source emails.

CIO Information in the News is published by the Office of Information and Technology to inform the VA information technology (IT) community of projects, activities, significant accomplishments, and upcoming events. You are invited to submit contributing articles. Please send your articles electronically to *CIO Newsletter*.

CIO Information in the News is available on the world wide web at www.va.gov/oirm/news/index.htm.

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